

CONTESTED SOVEREIGNTY: ARMED GROUPS, STATE FRAGILITY, AND THE EROSION OF AUTHORITY IN NIGERIA.

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the contested sovereignty in Nigeria, where the existence of armed groups and weakened state institutions have led to a decline in governmental power. It analyses the ways in which the Nigerian government's exclusive control over violence and territory is challenged by the dynamics involving non-state armed groups, such as separatist movements, bandit militias, and Boko Haram, along with the decline of state institutions. Employing a solely base on 2015-2025 secondary data method, the research consolidates findings from academic publications, conflict databases (including ACLED and the Nigeria Security Tracker), governmental documents, and evaluations from international organisations. By means of thematic and comparative analysis, the study explores trends of state withdrawal, the emergence of alternative governance systems, and the effects on national stability. Based on the research, armed groups are exploiting weaknesses within the state institutions to dominate communities and regions, leading to an increasing fragmentation of Nigeria's sovereignty. This study contributes to broader discussions surrounding hybrid governance, state collapse, and the challenges associated with restoring state authority in prolonged periods of instability.

Keywords: Armed groups, Contested sovereignty, Governance erosion. Nigeria, State fragility,

INTRODUCTION

Sovereignty refers to the effective exercise of monopoly over the legitimate use of physical force within a defined territory. It is derived from the state's capacity to control coercion and secure legitimacy (Cappelen & Hariri, 2026). It stems from the state's ability to maintain legitimacy and manage coercion. However, the growth of armed non-state actors acting in unstable political situations is increasingly challenging state sovereignty in modern international relations. Internal strife, bad governance, and socioeconomic disparities have undermined the monopoly of violence, which has long been seen as a characteristic of contemporary statehood in many postcolonial governments (Migdal, 2001). The existence and ongoing activities of armed groups pose significant ethical and political dilemmas regarding the concept of sovereignty in the Global South. Conventional Westphalian definitions of sovereignty focus on territorial authority and the principle of non-intervention. Conversely, the failure to safeguard civilians and uphold order complicates this perspective (Kaldor, 2012). Nigeria is a prime example of contested sovereignty where the state and non-state actors share authority, frequently in violent ways (Krasner, 1999; Reno, 2011). Nigerian government finds it difficult to maintain effective control over its territory in the face of armed groups. These groups include Boko Haram and its ISWAP splinter group in the Northeast, the ethnic militias in the Niger Delta, the rising violence from armed banditry and kidnapping networks in the Northwest, and the lethal clashes between farmers and herders in the Middle Belt. This situation represents not only security risks, but it essentially acts as alternative governance structures that undermine, challenge, and directly contest the sovereign power of the Nigerian state (Agbibo, 2018; Onuoha, 2020). Furthermore, these groups have not only compromised public safety but have also weakened the legitimacy and capability of the Nigerian state.

Non-state actors continue to engage in widespread armed violence in Nigeria, undermining the state's exclusive authority over violence and control within its borders. In the first half of 2025, attacks by non-state armed groups (NSAGs) in the northeast, northwest, and north-central regions resulted in the displacement of millions of people and at least 2,266 fatalities. This number is higher than the 2,194 reported casualties for the full year 2024. By the end of 2025, the Northeast alone had about 2.2 million mass displaced individuals, the Northwest had over 650,000, and the North-Central region had roughly

602,000 (ACAPS, 2025). In a similar vein, armed bandit groups regularly assault villages and security forces. By October 2025, armed attackers had killed eight security personnel (AP News, 2025). These figures demonstrate how vast regions efficiently operate without strong governmental oversight.

Additionally, these militia not only assault government establishments but also levy taxes and exercise *de facto* control over regions in the North-East, North-West, and South-East. They are increasingly taking on responsibilities that were traditionally the purview of the state, making sovereignty a more contested political process rather than a stable legal status. This research places Nigeria within this changing context, investigating how the interplay between armed groups, state fragility, and governance shortcomings contributes to the erosion of state authority and redefines the concept of sovereignty in modern African politics. This trend highlights enduring state fragility, characterised by a decline in public confidence, poor service provision, and weak institutions (Rotberg, 2004).

RESEARCH PROBLEM

The modern state is usually defined by its ability to exercise sovereign authority and maintain a monopoly on the legitimate use of force within its borders. However, in Nigeria, this key aspect of statehood has become more challenged due to the rise of armed non-state actors. These include insurgent groups, bandits, militias, and separatist movements. These groups have increasingly undermined the state's ability to enforce laws, provide security, and gain political legitimacy in large parts of its territory. Consequently, Nigeria is experiencing a growing crisis of state weakness, marked by insecurity, ungoverned areas, competing authorities, and declining public trust in formal institutions.

Despite the increasing research on insecurity, terrorism, and conflict in Nigeria, most studies focus on armed violence mainly as a security issue. They often overlook the deeper crisis of sovereignty and authority. There is still a substantial gap in understanding how armed groups' activities connect with weak governance, failing institutions, and social-political divisions. These factors together undermine the Nigerian state's real authority. Additionally, there has been little focus on how disputed sovereignty changes the relationship between the state and society. It also alters what is seen as legitimate and creates different kinds of authority in unstable situations. Basically, this paper aims to explore how the activities of armed groups weaken state institutions and led to a decline in governmental power in Nigeria.

This study faces the challenge of explaining how armed non-state actors weaken state authority in Nigeria. It looks at the ways sovereignty is contested in unstable environments and the impact of this on national stability, governance, and state legitimacy. Understanding this issue is important. It can help advance discussions on sovereignty and state weakness, as well as guide policy solutions that aim to restore state authority, strengthen institutions, and promote lasting peace in Nigeria.

METHODOLOGY

This research utilizes a qualitative research design that is entirely based on secondary data analysis to investigate how armed groups challenge sovereignty in Nigeria, as well as how state fragility plays a role in undermining state authority. A qualitative secondary data methodology is suitable for comprehending intricate socio-political dynamics, interpreting narratives, and recognizing trends in existing literature and reports, rather than producing new empirical data (Ameh, 2023; Uvere & Adiele, 2025). By integrating scholarly articles, policy evaluations, and documented case studies, this study aims to develop a comprehensive understanding of contested sovereignty that is defined in this context as the conflict between the Nigerian state and armed groups over legitimate authority and territorial dominance.

The research employs thematic content analysis, which is particularly effective for synthesizing narratives and revealing recurring patterns within written texts. This process includes coding essential concepts such as governance deficits, the legitimacy of armed groups, and the decline of state authority. Identifying persistent themes associated with the causes and effects of contested sovereignty (for instance, socio-economic marginalization, porous borders, and inadequate security responses). Cross-comparing evidence from various sources to create a cohesive analysis of how the fragility of the Nigerian state allows armed groups to exercise *de facto* authority. Thematic content analysis of secondary data enables the researcher to establish connections between existing studies, identify gaps, and develop conceptual insights without the need for original fieldwork.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This research is fundamentally based on State Fragility Theory. This theory offers a unified analytical perspective for investigating the ways in which armed groups erode Nigeria's state authority and create rival centers of power.

State Fragility Theory

The State Fragility Theory serves as the fundamental analytical framework for this research. This theory asserts that a state becomes fragile when it lacks the necessary institutional capacity, legitimacy and coercive power to carry out crucial state functions. These function manifests in terms of providing security and maintaining territorial control (Rotberg, 2004; OECD, 2011). Fragile states are marked by weak governance structures, inadequate service delivery, porous borders and an inability to monopolize the legitimate use of force. The primary assumption of State Fragility Theory is that in situations where the state fails to govern effectively, non-state actors arise to occupy the resulting authority vacuum. These actors spanning from insurgent groups and militias to criminal bandits that frequently take on governance roles, exert coercive authority and gain local legitimacy, thus challenging the sovereignty of the state (Rotberg, 2004; Fund for Peace, 2023).

This theory holds particular significance for Nigeria, where ongoing insecurity, socio-economic disparities, corruption, and institutional deterioration have diminished the state's ability to maintain authority throughout its territory. Armed factions such as Boko Haram, the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP), armed bandits in the North-West, and militant organisations in the Niger Delta illustrate how state fragility enables the emergence of alternative power structures that undermine state sovereignty (Ameh, 2023; Ndidigwe & Adie, 2021). In this research, State Fragility Theory serves as the analytical framework by connecting governance failures to the rise of armed groups and elucidating how these entities take advantage of institutional vulnerabilities to establish de facto control. Consequently, this framework is directly aligned with the research aim of investigating the correlation between state weakness and contested sovereignty in Nigeria.

Table 1: Conceptual Framework – From State Fragility to Contested Sovereignty

Phase	Driver	Mechanism	Result
State Fragility	Institutional decay and security vacuums	The state loses its monopoly on violence and retreats from peripheries.	Power Vacuum
Armed Group Governance	Need for territorial control and civilian compliance	Non-state actors collect taxes, enforce security, and resolve local legal disputes.	Alternative Authority
Contested Sovereignty	Institutionalization of rebel administration	Parallel governance structures actively block state re-entry and normalize dual rule.	Fragmented Hegemony

Table 1 illustrates the three-stage process by which a central government's institutional decay enables insurgent groups to rule and permanently divide national authority. **State Fragility (The Cause):** Institutional failure and security vacuums force state forces to retreat to core cities, leaving peripheral regions without basic public services or law enforcement. **Armed Group Governance (The Process):** Non-state actors step into the void and act as quasi-governments—collecting taxes, policing, and settling legal disputes—to convert raw force into local compliance and institutional legitimacy. **Contested Sovereignty (The Outcome):** As rebel administration normalizes, a dual-authority system takes hold, actively blocking the state's return and permanently fragmenting sovereign power across the territory.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This section reviews the scholarly literature on issues of state fragility, contested sovereignty, Armed Groups and the Erosion of State Authority. It demonstrates that these issues are interconnected rather than separate incidents.

State fragility

The concept of state fragility has gained prominence in political science and development studies as scholars seek to explain why some states struggle to exercise authority, deliver public goods, and maintain legitimacy. Early foundational work by Tareke (2021) conceptualizes state fragility along a continuum from weak to failed states, emphasizing the erosion of the state's monopoly over the legitimate use of force as a core indicator of failure. From this perspective, fragility is closely linked to insecurity, political instability, and institutional breakdown, particularly in post-conflict and post-colonial contexts. According to this viewpoint, fragility is strongly associated with political instability, insecurity, and institutional collapse, especially in post-colonial and post-conflict environments.

By emphasizing the multifaceted character of fragility, later research expanded this limited security-focused view. According to Nwosu (2025), state fragility is more than just the incapacity to control violence; it also includes flaws in political institutions, social cohesion, economic management, and governance. According to this perspective, fragility is reframed as a systemic phenomenon where a number of institutional failures compound one another, reducing the efficacy of the state and eroding public confidence.

Carment, Prest, and Samy (2010) present the influential Authority–Legitimacy–Capacity (ALC) framework, which builds upon this multifaceted approach. They contend that states become vulnerable when they lack the capacity to deliver essential services, the legitimacy to compel public consent, or the authority to control territory and enforce laws. In this sense, fragility is dynamic rather than static as shortcomings in one area can make deficiencies in another worse. Because it enables comparative and policy-relevant analysis, the ALC framework has gained widespread adoption.

Similarly, fragility studies also place a strong emphasis on structural and historical factors. According to Englebert and Tull (2008), the mismatch between weak domestic legitimacy and externally acknowledged sovereignty. It maintains that a legacy of colonial state formation is the cause of fragility in many African governments. In a similar vein, Acemoglu and Robinson (2012) highlight how extractive political and economic systems contribute to inequality, poor state capacity, and poor governance. These studies highlight the ways in which historical paths influence fragility in the present.

Contested Sovereignty

The idea of sovereignty has been important in international relations. It is traditionally seen as the highest authority of a state over its territory and population. Classical theorists like Weber (1919) define sovereignty as the state's control over the rightful use of physical force. Westphalian views focus on non-interference and territorial integrity. However, modern scholars increasingly question this strict and absolute view. They argue that sovereignty is not fixed or consistently applied. Krasner (1999) introduces the term “organized hypocrisy.” It shows that sovereignty is often violated in practice through intervention, outside influence, and internal weakness. This perspective allows us to see sovereignty as something that is contested rather than absolute.

A large number of studies connect contested sovereignty to state weakness and instability. Jackson (1990) makes a distinction between juridical sovereignty, which many post-colonial states have due to international recognition, and empirical sovereignty, which means actual governing ability. He argues that many states have legal sovereignty but lack effective domestic power, leading to internal conflicts with non-state actors. Similarly, Clapham (1996) demonstrates how weak institutional presence lets warlords, militias, and rebel groups exert de facto sovereignty within state borders. Furthermore, the rise of armed non-state actors has intensified debates about contested sovereignty. Kalyvas (2006) shows how civil wars create fragmented authority, where state and non-state actors compete for territorial control, legitimacy, and civilian support. In these situations, sovereignty becomes unevenly distributed, with areas under state

control existing next to regions governed by insurgents or militias. This fragmentation questions the idea of the state as the only source of authority.

Another significant theme in the literature on contested sovereignty is humanitarian intervention and the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) theory. Bellamy (2009) contends that R2P redefines sovereignty as responsibility, indicating that states lost some sovereign guarantees when they fail to secure their populations. However, detractors claim that while powerful governments are mostly unaffected, these standards selectively weaken the sovereignty of lesser states (Chandler, 2010). This discussion demonstrates how sovereignty is politically disputed and implemented unevenly on a global scale. Similarly, contested sovereignty frequently takes the form of alternative governing arrangements in vulnerable and conflict-affected governments. Arjona (2016) demonstrates how armed organisations create systems of justice, taxes, and security during civil wars, thereby carrying out state-like tasks. These types of rebel administration further erode centralized sovereignty by obfuscating the distinction between state and non-state authority.

Lastly, modern security studies associate transnational concerns like organized crime and terrorism with contested sovereignty. Ayoob (1995) places contested sovereignty in the context of the Global South's unfinished state-building, when legitimacy deficiencies, external pressures, and internal insecurity come together. These circumstances complicate claims of sovereignty by enabling armed organisations to contest state authority while also drawing international action.

Armed Groups and the Erosion of State Authority

By challenging the state's exclusive right to use force, armed groups fundamentally undermine state authority, according to a large body of scholarly research. According to Max Weber's traditional definition of the state, authority is based on the sole control of violence within a certain area (Weber, 1919). This monopoly is undermined and the foundations of state sovereignty are weakened when armed groups such as rebels, militias, warlords, or criminal gangs exercise coercion outside of the state. Tilly (1985) goes on to say that coercion and war-making have historically produced state authority, suggesting that modern armed groups are similar to early state-building processes but lack legitimacy, leading to fragmentation rather than consolidation of authority.

Kalyvas (2006) gives a micro-level viewpoint by investigating how armed factions maintain dominance during civil conflicts. He contends that violence is purposefully employed to collect resources from civilian populations and ensure compliance. Alternative systems of governance based on cooperation, fear, or survival take the place of governmental authority when armed groups successfully control local areas. This narrow loss of power illustrates how state collapse is frequently uneven, happening in particular areas rather than consistently throughout the entire state. Many academics point out that armed organisations frequently acquire legitimacy by stepping in to fill the gaps in the state's administration. According to Mampilly (2011), in areas they control, rebel organisations frequently administer justice, provide social services, and govern economic activity. Such governance delegitimizes the state by revealing its incapacity to carry out fundamental tasks, even though it may produce some local legitimacy. As a result, state power is diminished rather than totally eradicated in a competitive governance context.

Criminal armed organisations, such as bandits and organized criminal networks, also contribute considerably to the loss of state authority. According to Ayoob (2007), state failure in the Global South is mostly caused by internal conflicts and non-ideological armed warfare. These organisations frequently work in tandem with or in conjunction with state authorities, taking advantage of economic inequity, corruption, and weak governance. Their actions strengthen views of official incompetence or involvement and erode public confidence in state institutions.

When armed organisations take advantage of identity politics, authority erosion is exacerbated. According to Fearon and Laitin (2003), significant ethnic grievances alone are not the only factors that increase the likelihood of insurgency; states with poor administrative capability, difficult terrain, and political instability are more likely. Armed organisations undermine national cohesiveness and the legitimacy of

central authority by mobilizing support through ethnic or religious identities. Insecurity becomes a larger crisis of statehood as a result of this dynamic.

The global aspect of authority loss is frequently highlighted in contemporary writing. According to Clapham (1996), states' capacity to manage violence within their boundaries is diminished by globalization, porous borders, and transnational networks that give armed groups access to weapons, money, and safe havens. Particularly in weak governments, outside assistance—whether financial, military, or ideological—strengthens armed organisations and further restricts state power.

Boko Haram

The Boko Haram insurgency poses a significant threat to Nigeria's sovereignty. Analyzing this through the lens of State Fragility Theory reveals that it has undermined three critical aspects of the state: authority, capacity, and legitimacy (Rosvadoski-da-Silva, et al., 2021). Since 2009, Boko Haram has contested government authority, targeted security personnel, disrupted governance processes, and diminished public trust in the state. Furthermore, Boko Haram has challenged the government's sole right to exercise force. In August 2014, the group took control of Gwoza in Borno State and proclaimed a "caliphate." According to ACLED data, over 53,000 individuals have lost their lives due to political violence in Nigeria since 2009, which includes fatalities associated with Boko Haram, ISWAP, and related conflicts (ACLED, 2025). Similarly, As of August 2025, Nigeria was home to 3,575,114 internally displaced persons (IDPs), with 2,252,348 of them situated in the Northeast, where Boko Haram insurgency continued to be the primary reason for displacement (EUAA, 2025).

The group has persisted in targeting Nigerian military personnel. In January 2026, alleged Boko Haram fighters killed seven soldiers and took 13 more captive in Borno State (Reuters, 2026). These assaults illustrate the ongoing difficulties Nigeria faces in asserting its authority. Boko Haram has sought to establish a rival authority in territories under its influence. The group's declaration of a caliphate and its attempts to enforce its own laws have contested the authority of Abuja. However, this should not be construed as an indication of extensive popular legitimacy for Boko Haram. Much of its power has stemmed from violence, coercion, and intimidation. Consequently, Boko Haram has not legally supplanted the Nigerian state; however, it has challenged Nigeria's effective sovereignty in certain regions. Nigeria continues to be the internationally acknowledged sovereign authority, yet its capacity to maintain effective control has been put to the test. The situation with Boko Haram illustrates that sovereignty can be diminished without the total disintegration of the state. A state can retain its legal sovereignty even while facing significant deficiencies in territorial governance, institutional strength, security delivery, and public legitimacy.

Bandits in Northwest Nigeria and the Erosion of Nigerian Sovereignty

Banditry in Northwestern Nigeria can be analysed through the lens of State Fragility Theory, which illustrates how weak governmental institutions create an environment for non-state armed groups to confront state authority (Caleb, 2026). A fragile state often struggles to effectively regulate violence, territory, and governance. In Northwestern Nigeria, armed factions commonly referred to as Yan ta'adda have progressed beyond typical criminal behavior and are increasingly contesting state authority in regions such as Zamfara, Katsina, Kaduna, Sokoto, and Niger states (Abdullahi, 2024). Their actions exemplify what Reno (2011) describes as the "privatization of sovereignty", where non-state actors assume roles traditionally held by the state, including the application of force, collection of taxes, and the establishment of informal systems of power.

From the perspective of State Fragility Theory, the banditry crisis highlights deficiencies in three primary aspects: state authority, state capacity, and state legitimacy. The first aspect is the lack of authority. A sovereign state is anticipated to uphold a monopoly over the rightful use of force within its borders. Nevertheless, the ongoing operations of heavily armed bandit groups illustrate the state's constrained ability to manage violence in certain areas of the Northwest. Between 2023 and 2025, the region reportedly witnessed approximately 3,600 incidents of bandit-related violence, which led to an estimated 9,380 fatalities (ACAPS, 2025). Zamfara and Katsina States alone represented nearly 57% of these deaths, indicating a concentration of violence in regions where state control is notably frail.

The crisis has also weakened the Nigerian state's capacity and legitimacy. Kidnapping for ransom has expanded insecurity and reduced public confidence in the government's ability to protect citizens. The Northwest reportedly accounted for a significant proportion of kidnapping incidents and victims between May 2023 and April 2024 (PR Nigeria, 2026). Bandit attacks have also caused widespread displacement, with an estimated 700,000 people uprooted in the Northwest (ACAPS, 2024). From the perspective of State Fragility Theory, these developments demonstrate a cycle, whereby weak security and governance allow armed groups to expand. The activities of these groups further weaken state authority, capacity, and legitimacy. Banditry in Northwestern Nigeria is therefore not merely a criminal problem but a broader crisis of state fragility and contested sovereignty (Mon, David, & Obiora, 2025; Reno, 2011).

Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB): A Separatist Movement

The Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) is a separatist movement in southeastern Nigeria advocating for the secession of the predominantly Igbo region, rooted in historical grievances dating back to the Nigerian Civil War (1967–1970). IPOB's activities, especially its sit-at-home campaigns and the actions of affiliated armed groups, have increasingly challenged Nigerian sovereignty by undermining the state's authority, disrupting governance, and inflicting significant socio-economic and security costs (George, Udoudo & Nwachukwu, 2024; Osimen, Chukwudi, Oladoyin, Nnaemeka, & Dada, 2024). State fragility theory provides a critical lens through which to understand this phenomenon. According to this framework, state fragility is characterised by the inability of the state to fulfill its core functions—including maintaining a monopoly on the legitimate use of force, providing essential services, and upholding the rule of law throughout its territory (Rotberg, 2004; Uvere & Adiele, 2025). When a state fails to address historical grievances, manage identity-based demands, and deliver equitable development, it creates conditions where separatist movements like IPOB can gain traction, mobilizing populations around ethnic and regional identities and challenging the territorial integrity and legitimacy of the state (Call, 2008; Stewart, 2008). IPOB's emergence and persistence in the Southeast thus can be understood as both a symptom and a driver of Nigeria's state fragility, as the movement exploits governance deficits, perceived marginalization, and the state's diminished capacity to project authority and enforce its laws (Osimen et al., 2024).

One of the most prominent methods by which IPOB has contested Nigerian sovereignty is through the implementation of sit-at-home protests—a weekly mandate instructing residents of the southeast to remain indoors. Initially presented as peaceful demonstrations aimed at securing the release of IPOB leader Nnamdi Kanu, these directives have been enforced through coercive measures by associated groups and have resulted in significant socio-economic and governance repercussions (Deutsche Welle, 2025). As reported by SBM Intelligence, over 700 individuals have lost their lives in southeastern Nigeria from 2021 to 2025 due to violence associated with IPOB's sit-at-home orders, which include enforcement actions against civilians who resist compliance and confrontations with Nigerian security forces. These fatalities have occurred alongside economic damages surpassing 7.6 trillion naira (\$4.79 billion), as vital sectors such as transportation, commerce, and education have faced stagnation due to the continuous halting of economic activities (SBM Intelligence, 2025; George, Udoudo & Nwachukwu, 2024). From the perspective of state fragility theory, this represents a fundamental erosion of sovereign authority. When a non-state actor can effectively dictate when citizens may engage in economic activity, paralyze public life, and impose costs on those who resist, it demonstrates the state's diminished capacity to project authority and maintain order (Patrick, 2014; Uvere & Adiele, 2025). The economic devastation caused by these mandates further weakens the state by reducing tax revenues, disrupting markets, and deepening the socio-economic grievances that sustain separatist mobilization—creating a self-reinforcing cycle of fragility and rebellion (Rotberg, 2004). The inability of the Nigerian state to prevent these disruptions or protect citizens who defy the orders underscores the erosion of its coercive capacity and the limits of its governance in the Southeast (Stewart, 2008).

Furthermore, IPOB's demonstrations have often been linked to violent enforcement methods that go beyond mere peaceful civil disobedience. Numerous reports highlight violent occurrences involving arson, targeted assassination, and confrontations with security personnel, with some of these actions attributed to IPOB followers or the Eastern Security Network (ESN), which is said to be aligned with the movement. Between 2021 and 2025, the southeastern region experienced 332 violent incidents and 776 fatalities associated with sit-at-home orders and related turmoil, with Imo State alone reporting 332 deaths

(OCHA, 2025; Nwangwu, 2023). These statistics indicate that the conflict surpasses mere economic disruptions, posing direct threats to state security forces and citizen safety. The armed enforcement of sit-at-home orders undermines the state's ability to ensure security and maintain the rule of law—essential elements of sovereign authority (The Guardian, 2021). Within the framework of state fragility theory, the emergence of the ESN as an armed group operating in parallel to state security forces represents a classic symptom of state fragility—the proliferation of non-state armed actors who challenge the state's monopoly on the legitimate use of force and establish de facto control over territory and populations (Uvere & Adiele, 2025; Call, 2008).

CONCLUSION

This study analyses the complexities of contested sovereignty in Nigeria. It examines the interactions among armed non-state actors, state weakness, and the gradual decline of government power. By using secondary data and theoretical insights on sovereignty, state fragility, and security governance, the paper shows that Nigeria's sovereignty is more fragmented than absolute. Armed groups like Boko Haram in the Northeast, bandit groups in the Northwest, and separatist movements such as the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) in the Southeast have become significant challengers to the state's control over the legitimate use of force and its ability to govern effectively within its borders.

The findings show that these armed groups contest Nigerian sovereignty in different but linked ways. Insurgent groups weaken territorial control and security through ongoing violence and occupation. Bandit groups undermine state authority by taking advantage of weak borders, inadequate policing, and informal economies. Separatist movements question the state's legitimacy and political authority by pushing identity-based grievances and disrupting governance with coercive non-state actions. Together, these dynamics reveal deep weaknesses in the Nigerian state, such as institutional decline, poor civil-military relations, uneven development, and ongoing governance issues.

Base on the above findings, this paper recommends the following:

Institutional Reforms and Local Governance: Nigerian government must prioritize comprehensive institutional reforms aimed at strengthening state capacity, accountability, and the rule of law. Reinforcing sub-national structures specifically local government councils, traditional institutions, and administrative agencies. These are essential for improving public service delivery, enhancing accountability, and rebuilding state legitimacy among local populations.

Regional Cooperation and Holistic Security: Given the transnational nature of arms trafficking, insurgency, and cross-border banditry, Nigeria must deepen regional security collaboration through joint patrols, information sharing, and partnerships with ECOWAS and the MNJTF. Furthermore, effective security governance requires shifting away from an overreliance on military force toward a balanced approach that integrates intelligence-led policing, civil-military trust, and strict human rights standards.

Socio-Economic Development and Conflict Transformation: Nigeria should dismantle the structural drivers of conflict requires targeted economic interventions, inclusive governance practices, and sustained political dialogue to address poverty, marginalization, and historical grievances. These efforts must be paired with transparent, justice-based peacebuilding strategies including structured community engagement, amnesty, and de-radicalization programs to weaken the appeal of non-state armed actors and foster long-term stability.

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